



## *Violence on the Border, Immigration, and the Mission of the Church*

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I am particularly grateful for the invitation to speak at this symposium on how violence is affecting life on the border between Texas and Mexico because the Texas / Mexican border region is the place in the world where God has given to me the deepest and most enduring blessings in my life. The river is in my blood, so to speak, and its past, its present and future cut deeply into my soul. My grandparents were born in Guerrero Viejo, Tamaulipas, and later moved to Old Zapata, in Texas. When they moved in those early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Old Zapata was just across the river, but later, after the building of Falcon Dam in the 1950's, it was just across from Falcon Lake. My parents were born in the old town, and my sense of Church, of family, and history, of honor and identity have been and continue to be nourished by roots that go as deep as the memories of my parents and grandparents, and their memories of their parents and grandparents. For that is how it was on the border. The late 19<sup>th</sup> Century struggles of Mexico in the waning days of the *Porfiriato* could be the subject of table conversation and could somehow be made to come alive within my hearing as a child; the trials of Mexican Franciscans seeking refuge from the persecutions in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century could be made real by an aging relative telling the tale to a young boy. And stories of American soldiers camped on the river in the days of the revolution sounded like just yesterday to that 12-year-old.

What I speak about tonight is a matter that flows from a sense of pastoral urgency as a shepherd on the border. And what I speak about tonight flows also from a personal urgency, from my interior sense of love for the people who live on both sides of the great river, and from a sense of stewardship of the cultural richness and depth that runs as a river of grace through them. From this river of grace I have generously received.

I propose this evening to discuss the current social and pastoral situation affecting our families in the Rio Grande Valley. And I will do this by describing some of the challenges we face on the border due to the criminal violence afflicting northern Mexico. Many of my descriptions are anecdotal, though there is no lack of law-enforcement records and testimonies to support the particular accounts I will offer. I will also propose some social and pastoral commentary based upon the reality I describe. Many of these are based on intuitions and reflections that, it seems to me, are appropriate for myself and others dedicated to the mission of the Church. I hasten to

note at the outset that similar, and indeed, more insightful accounts could be given by bishops and pastors all along the Rio Grande River.

Listening to the news and reading accounts of the ongoing public discussion of immigration and border security, I have a sense that we in the Church must do more to live up to our indispensable obligation to contribute to the discussion in a way that keeps it realistic and keeps it human. There is no defense of the human person that is not also a kind of realism. Realism is important because without it we are as a people trying to address difficulties that are incompletely understood. Keeping it human is important because we are not dealing only with numbers of people, and statistical variations. We are dealing with men, women and children, young folks and *las abuelitas*, confronting a horrific human tragedy.

At the conclusion of my remarks, I will offer a pastoral perspective, and some thoughts about the indispensable role of the Church in facing the current reality on the border.

## **PART ONE: VIOLENCE AND IMMIGRATION**

### **I. The increasing complexity of immigration from Mexico**

Last Spring, I said Mass at one of our local parish Catholic elementary schools. It is a good school, with an excellent learning environment. After Mass, the principal asked me if I could take a few minutes to say hello to a mother with two daughters in the school. They would appreciate it, she said, because they are going through a difficult time. So I made my way to the back of the church and found the mother with her two daughters near the sacristy. The mother explained to me that they were from near Tampico, Mexico, and that they had recently moved to Texas. Her husband, the father of the two girls, remained in Mexico working. I suspect he is a professional of some kind, perhaps an engineer or the owner of a small business. I hear regularly of families in similar situations, a wife and children relocated to the Valley, and a father remaining in Mexico to continue working to support the family.

Sadly, though, what the mother and the daughters had to say to me is also something I hear about regularly. The family had not heard from the husband and father in three months. He has been kidnapped, and no word has been received as to his whereabouts. The mother wanted a blessing for her children, and she asked that I keep their situation in my prayers, especially when I say Mass.

Earlier this fall, I was saying a Sunday Mass at a local parish in the Diocese, and was happily greeting people after Mass, blessing babies, and saying a few words of encouragement to the parishioners. A woman, probably in her 40's introduced me to her elderly mother and asked if I would bless her mother, and pray for her three

brothers. *Mis tres hermanos han sido secuestrados*, she said. They had been kidnapped, and no word had been heard from them for several weeks. *No son ricos*, she added, *son labradores, y no tenemos mucho dinero. Hemos pagado el dinero, pero no hemos oído nada.*

These three brothers are not professionals; they are construction laborers in northern Mexico. The sister and their mother are in the Valley, and are desperately worried that they will never hear from the three brothers again. *Mi mama está enferma, por favor Monseñor, ruega por ella y mis hermanos. Que Dios nos conceda un milagro.* I asked the Sister to write down the names of her brothers so that I could place them on the altar in my chapel, and thus remember them at the Mass and in the Divine Office.

And let me tell you of the elderly woman who approached me after the patronal Mass in one of our rural parishes in Starr County. Amid all the food and music that happily accompanies *las fiestas patronales*, she approached me and pulled me by the arm so she could whisper in my ear. She told me that she was here without documents because she had no one left in her native town just across the border. *Mataron a mi hijo, y no tengo a nadie. Ruegue por mí, y ruegue por México.*

I have been invited into the homes of some of the wealthier Mexican families living in the Valley. Wealthier segments of the Mexican population have long kept a second home in parts of the Rio Grande Valley, whether a condominium on South Padre Island, or a home in one of the gated communities present in our larger cities. What is different now? They have told me what is different now: increasingly, the entire family moves to the second home in the United States, abandoning for the foreseeable future the principal home in Monterrey, Tampico, or Mexico City; *por razones de seguridad*. The father in the family will fly into Mexico to attend to business when necessary, but conducts much of his business via telephone and internet. And more homes are being built to accommodate the families seeking a less tense, and a more secure environment.

The dominant fact is that the women and children are here. The men are often still in Mexico working to support them. They visit when they can. This is a new phenomenon, and not one that fits into the usual descriptions of immigration that we hear about on the news. We are accustomed to hearing about the opposite social dynamic: the mothers and children remain in Mexico, and the men, the teenage boys and young women come to the United States looking for work so as to send money home to support them. In the different dynamic that I have described, the families affected adjust in what way they can. The educated professionals and businessmen can usually prepare the needed documentation for the appropriate visas or residency, for their families. The widows and the poor advance across the border by other means.

The new reality is rooted in what each of these families have in common: fear. They do not live in the Valley, or in Laredo, or in San Antonio primarily for economic

reasons; rather, fear of kidnapping, random shootings, being caught at the wrong time in the wrong place, these are the pressures moving them. They are driven also by the fear that their children will grow up in, and know only, a lawless and cynical community if they remain at home.

One local law enforcement official put it this way:

We know that people in Mexico live in constant fear, not just for their safety, but for their lives, the lives of their children, and for their personal property. Their stories are pure horror. We often listen to them. We listen to them, because they escape to the United States and to our communities. They come to our communities because they feel safe here. All of them get here as fast as they can.”<sup>1</sup>

## II. Realistic perspective

Twice a year, the bishops of Texas with territory on the border meet with bishops of Mexico whose dioceses also approach the border. One of the realities that we discuss is the rapidly shifting character of immigration from Mexico into the United States. We discuss this primarily to keep each other informed of what is affecting our people in concrete ways, so that we can adapt pastoral strategies in accord with these factors. What follows in this section are a few observations based upon those meetings and upon my subsequent reflections on life in the Valley.

In summary, the situation we are facing is much more complex than it was just five years ago. The conditions driving immigration patterns can be divided roughly into four general categories. The wealthy, out of fear, are leaving parts of Northern Mexico. They are establishing their homes and even their businesses in the United States. These families often nourish hopes of returning home *cuando se componga la cosa*. That is to say, when things get better back home.

A second group would include the professionals and businessmen who send their families to the United States while they themselves remain the bulk of the time working in Mexico. Here the fear is kidnapping or getting caught in a line of fire.

A third group includes the poorer working class, themselves gainfully employed in Mexico, but finding it an intolerable situation for their families. Not long ago, while visiting one of our poorer parishes for Confirmation, the pastor told me that many of his parishioners tell him of the telephone calls they get from anonymous persons in Matamoros or Reynosa, demanding ransom for a brother, a cousin, or an uncle whom they claim they have kidnapped. The family ties between those who are in the Valley

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<sup>11</sup> Victor Rodriguez, Chief of Police of McAllen, Texas; Testimony before Congress, May 11, 2011.

for reasons of fear, and those who have remained home to work make the working poor particularly vulnerable to petty claims for ransom.

And then there are those who are here primarily looking for work, the immigrants, we would say, that fit the typical narrative that we hear about when immigration is discussed in the public square in the United States. Some reports I have seen seem to indicate that the numbers of immigrants from Mexico approaching the United States in order to look for work is down, compared to past years, due, some say, to the weakness of the American economy.

I do not have any statistics or numbers to offer you delineating how many people are in the Rio Grande Valley for the various reasons I have briefly described. I do know they are many; they are suffering, and we have to respond generously to the reality they (and we) are living.

Several years ago the bishops of the United States and Mexico jointly published a document on immigration entitled *Strangers No Longer*. In that document the point is made, one that I think is quite valid today, that people have the right to stay in their country of origin, and should not have to choose between some stark necessity and leaving their homeland.<sup>2</sup> That stark necessity could be the threat of starvation, or the inability to support a family in the homeland. The principle holds true when the issue is violence, and the fear of violence. These families I described to you would quite happily continue working and raising their children in northern Mexico, were it not for the fear that pervades life there.

People do not cross the bridges into Mexico so much as they used to. To be sure, there is still plenty of traffic from Texas into Mexico, and from Mexico into Texas, but vacationers, or simply Valley residents going across to have dinner or go shopping are not so frequent anymore. You can see it in the number of fine eating establishments and stores that have re-located from Matamoros and Reynosa into Brownsville and McAllen, for example. If people will not go across to eat anymore, then *across* will come to where the people are. We should be concerned for the economic impact on Mexico, though.

You do not have to be an economist or a sociologist to see that there is a relation between this newer phenomenon of immigration and the more traditional dynamic. Put simply, we must be concerned about the long term economic impact on Mexico that the new situations I have described will have. If the entrepreneurs and business men, the very ones who offer employment opportunities to Mexican citizens in Mexico, are re-locating to Texas because of fear, then we can expect an increase of unemployment among those in Mexico who have never had the intention of coming to the United

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<sup>2</sup> *Strangers No Longer*, USCCB, January 22, 2003: no. 59.

States. There are many Mexican citizens, after all, who think of the United States in terms of the phrase: *Nice place to visit, but I would not want to live there*. Yet, if the middle class and the employer class are leaving because of violence, then we can expect the effects will be felt in an increase in poverty in Mexico. And this will surely put more pressure on immigration into the United States, only it will be doubly propelled by fear of violence and by poverty.

Still, it is important to add reference to another aspect of the violence and its affect on the immigrant population. This is a matter that should be of great concern to us all, and is certainly a great concern to the bishops in northern Mexico. We have all read or seen reports about the massacres of Central American immigrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, and other places. Those murdered in these incidents the poorest of the poor from Central America, or southern Mexico, passing through the interior of Mexico on their way to the United States. The deaths in San Fernando shocked the sensibilities of many, and brought to the attention of both the Mexican and United States public the kind of organized brutality that frequently occurs in Mexico. As one Mexican journalist put it: *Before it was something that all of us knew, but it wasn't publicized.*<sup>3</sup>

I encourage you to read the documentary study done in Mexico by the *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*, (National Commission of Human Rights), entitled *Informe especial sobre secuestro de migrantes en México*.<sup>4</sup> Pay particular attention to the personal testimonies recorded there. Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and others, making their way through Mexico are routinely kidnapped from trains and buses. They are forced to give telephone numbers of their relatives in the United States, so that they can be contacted to pay ransom. The money is used to pay for the drug war, and if no money is forthcoming, the kidnap victims are killed, and if they are women or girls they are raped and killed, or if they survive, they are forced to labor for the cartel. It was likely this scenario that resulted in the deaths in San Fernando, and in many other places along the route from Central America to the United States. And I know with surety that kidnapping happens all too frequently on this side of the border.

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<sup>3</sup>Moises Gomez, reporter for *Hora Cero*, quoted in an article by Michael Barajas, *San Antonio Current*, June 8, 2011. (Gomez is a reporter who, after the San Fernando massacre, traveled to Central America and across Mexico to trace the path of immigrants on their way to the U.S. border.)

<sup>4</sup>Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos: *Informe especial sobre secuestro de migrantes en México*, 22 Febrero de 2011.

## PART TWO: THE NEW REALITY IN OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

### I. Breakdown of Trust

But, aside from the complex phenomenon of a much diversified immigrant population, and the tragic phenomenon of cartel violence unleashed on the poor from Central America and Mexico on their way to the United States, how is this new situation affecting the life of the people in the Rio Grande Valley?

I remember as a little boy hearing my uncles speak of the work they did *en el rancho*. *El rancho* meant the rough ranch land they owned in Zapata county, and on which they kept small herds of cattle, and a few horses. Often enough they would mention to us that some young men had been passing through the ranch, and that they stopped to ask for directions. This would have been the late 1960's. Everyone knew that this kind of encounter involved young men recently arrived from Mexico, probably on their way to San Antonio and beyond because of an opportunity to work. *Les dimos algo de comer, platicamos un rato, y les llenamos sus botellas de agua para el viaje*. Nobody asked for immigration papers, because in the ethos of life on the border, a markedly Christian ethos, people did not think of papers when it came to a situation of offering someone a brief respite in the shade, a time of conversation, something to eat and drink. This is called hospitality, and it is a basic human good. This basic human impulse is older than Homer, Virgil and the author of Beowulf. It is a norm of social relations that is prior to the legal distinction between documented or undocumented. Hospitality given to strangers, though, is possible only when there is a basic trust between persons, and a sense that if you are kind to a traveler on one day, someone will be kind to you when you are on a journey.

It is no longer this way on the border. A barking dog in the yard no longer hints at the approach of honest travelers. Now, people tense up at the sight of a traveling stranger. *¿Es un narco?*, people ask. Are they carrying drugs? Do they have guns? The violence has had a corrosive effect on the most basic of human relations. People have been injured and killed in an effort to be kind. But, I must add, I know people in the Valley who have acted heroically to help someone half-starved and beaten-up get medical attention and food.

*En México ya no conversamos sobre los acontecimientos del día en el bar o con el barbero. Porque nunca sabe uno quien está involucrado con las drogas.* On the Mexican side, we are told, it is not safe to talk about the events of the day with someone you do not know or trust personally. Conversation with the barber or restaurant worker is more limited than it used to be. And the word on the streets of Brownsville is that it is not safe to honk your horn at a car that suddenly cuts you off on the road. *Nunca sabe uno; si son de los malvados te matan.* People look suspiciously at their neighbors, and at strangers. People watch what they say, and where they say it.

It is also true that folks do not trust the press to report what is happening just across the border. *Si al cabo, amenazan a los reporteros. ¿como nos van a decir lo que está pasando?* And reports in the local press on the American side are sketchy and mostly unconfirmed. We hear about skirmishes on this side of the border, either by rumor or by press reports. Radio reports come across the air every now and then, usually beginning with the phrase “unconfirmed reports indicate”. They go on to say that cartel members fled across the river into the United States, seeking to escape gunfire from Mexican Federal Police. The last such report I heard, just a couple of weeks ago, said such an event happened in Starr County.

And so people rely on the whispered account of how many bodies were found in what town, and word of mouth, spread *con mucho cuidado*, informs people in the Valley about what may or may not have happened in the towns on the Mexican side.

*Encontraron cincuenta muertos ayer en Valle Hermoso.  
No. ¿que estás diciendo? fueron setenta y ocho.*

And the American press, cautious to report what cannot, perhaps for security reasons, be confirmed, alludes in tentative terms to the shadow of violence reaching into our communities. A general sense of unease creeps into the communities on the American side, as if everyone knows that whatever is reported is only the surface of a much deeper abyss of danger and lawlessness.

## **II. Law Enforcement**

The people of the Rio Grande Valley appreciate and are grateful to all those who work in law enforcement in our neighborhoods, on our streets and highways, and on the border itself. These city, county, state and federal officers are our neighbors, attend our churches and give of themselves heroically for the safety and protection of our communities.

*Me faltan palabras.* I cannot tell you how deeply moved I was by the outpouring of grief and support for the family of slain ICE agent Jaime Zapata. As you may recall, he was a Brownsville native who was killed in the line of duty in San Luis Potosi earlier this year. During the funeral procession, school children lined the streets holding little American flags as the long line of vehicles made their way to the cemetery. The faces of so many federal, state and local law enforcement officers who formed an honor guard for their fallen comrade has left a profound impression on me, and I can assure you, on the residents of the Valley. As recently as last week people have commented to me how deeply they were affected by Jaime Zapata’s death. There is pride throughout the Rio Grande Valley that our families have raised, and continue to raise noble sons and daughters like Jaime Zapata.

The simple fact is that he died in an effort to put a stop to an aggressive enemy, an enemy that seems to rejoice in death and destruction. The enemy has many facets to his countenance. He is the drug trade; he is the insatiable appetite for drug consumption. He is also the human trafficking trade that makes money off of children and defenseless adults. He is the deadness of conscience that can kill wantonly and in cold blood both nameless *Salvadoreños* passing through Mexico, and uniformed agents, assisting the Mexican government in the fight. This deadness of conscience then creeps like a silhouette into our local communities and manifests itself as a sense of fear and hopelessness marring the thoughts of children and old people, of parents and siblings.

I want to commend Border Patrol for the often heroic work they do in order to stop the drug trade, and the gangland violence that it spawns and pays for. Delivery of cocaine is an armed transaction, and many of our federal enforcement agents find themselves confronting an enemy that will shoot in order to defend his cargo making its way across the border.<sup>5</sup>

I have met with the leadership of law enforcement, at various times and on various levels, and we share a great many common concerns. Foremost among those concerns is the plague of human trafficking. There are people, right now in the Valley, and in other communities across the nation, young girls and boys, who are from Central America and Mexico, kidnapping victims. They are smuggled into the United States and kept against their will. Some are used as mules to carry drugs from one place to another; some are used to supply prostitution rings. Local law enforcement often expresses frustration because it is difficult to identify where people are being held against their will on the American side.

To my mind this is one of the principal reasons it is important for the various jurisdictions of law enforcement to remain focused upon their respective competencies. Little old ladies and their teenage grandsons who live in the Valley without immigration documents because they are afraid of getting shot in the cross-fire in a town like Matamoros, are not likely to report suspicious activity in the neighborhood to local police if they are afraid their immigration status will cause them to be deported immediately. But we need the help of everyone in the neighborhood to help identify and apprehend human traffickers, and other criminal elements within the population. Let the federal agents trained in immigration law enforcement enforce the law in the manner they think best; but let local law enforcement focus upon maintaining community order and peace. And as any local law enforcement officer will tell you, maintaining community peace requires the cooperation of the whole local population, the very ones who live in fear of the criminal elements operating in the neighborhood.

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<sup>5</sup> Sigifredo Gonzalez, Jr., Zapata County Sheriff: Testimony before Congress. May 11, 2011. See section "Border Threats".

And it is only reasonable that Federal law enforcement focus upon these criminal elements that afflict both recent immigrants and long time residents. There is a temptation for some to say “arrest all the undocumented, and deport them all.” But the boat is shipping water, and it is necessary to enlist all hands that are not actively trying to shoot holes into the boat. And, there is a moral distinction we as a civilized people should maintain: someone who overstays a tourist visa out of fear for their life is not in the same category as someone who is running a prostitution ring in the Valley to support the drug trade. To break the current immigration statutes is not the same as to be an agent of criminal gangs.

Another common concern is the vulnerability of our youth to the lure of money that can so easily pull them into the criminal activity that skates both sides of the border. Police officers and sheriff deputies, as well as ICE agents volunteer time to help organize youth sports activities, and supervised gathering places for kids. Younger kids are particularly vulnerable to older kids moving in to intimidate them into joining a gang or participating in some illegal activity. As the Director of the Texas Department of Public Safety recently stated publically:

Mexican cartels have corrupted an entire generation of youth living in Northern Mexico, and they seek to corrupt our youth as well to further their smuggling operation. The Mexican cartels value Texas teenagers for their ability to serve as expendable labor in many different roles and they have unlimited resources to recruit our children.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly we share a concern for the corrosive effect of money on the integrity and honor of all aspects of the local society. I mentioned a little earlier that in northern Mexico, it is not a good idea to mention in polite conversation at the barber-shop what you might have heard about the activities of criminal elements. It is sad to say that this kind of circumspection is growing on the American side. The circumspection is rooted in suspicion. Because everyone says that drug money moves easily across the border, many people are not entirely sure who might or might not be tainted by it. My point is about an atmosphere of distrust. Law enforcement itself knows that they must be particularly vigilant to maintain the community’s confidence in the integrity of everyday business and legal relations, and in the local institutions that touch our daily lives. As one law enforcement officer in Hidalgo County put it in testimony before Congress:

The threat is drug trafficking money that creeps, infiltrates and corrupts our communities. The threat is the crime that drug trafficking money causes. The threat is the criminals that drug trafficking money buys.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steve C. McCraw: As reported in the Brownsville Herald, October 14, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Victor Rodriguez, Chief of Police of McAllen, Texas; Testimony before Congress, May 11, 2011.

It is important to recall also that the enforcers of the law do not write the law, Congress does, and the President signs the law. When it comes to the urgent need to craft a more just and reasonable immigration law in the United States, our attention should be focused on Congress and the President. But when it comes to how we work in our communities, it is in everyone's interest that all the resources of the community, including the civil community, law enforcement and the Church marshal their resources together in an effort to push back the looming darkness that gathers south of us, and projects its shadows over us.

And this fundamental reality leads me to the concluding part of my reflection.

### **PART THREE: THE REALISM OF THE CHURCH**

#### **I. Activity in Favor of the Immigrant**

It must be the case that the Church, through her public voices including those of the laity who labor in the field of political activity, is obliged to call attention to the plight of the innocent who suffer. We must raise a call to conscience for the people of our two great nations to see how a culture of violence and death is destroying a people and a culture that has endured and flourished on both sides of the border for many generations. This destructive blight affects us in different ways on the two sides of the river, but they are interrelated ways.

Both in the United States and in Mexico, we must put our consciences at the service of our respective national consciences about these matters. We must insist in season and out of season that a just people distinguishes between the innocent and the guilty, and that a great and generous people respond to the plight of the widows and the orphans, those who mourn the loss of a brother, or a nephew, or a grandson.

Immigrants do have rights and the Church has the ability to help organize ways in which the newly arrived can learn about their rights, their recourse and their resources. These grass-roots efforts are a service to justice and charity. And the Church, imbued with the Spirit, sees the dignity of the human person as a precious mystery that must be defended; for if we do not defend it, it will be trampled. We all must call upon our people to see the need to protect the rights of immigrants, and respond generously to the plight that afflicts them.

And it particularly falls to the whole Church in communion with the bishops in the United States to insist on a national level that current immigration law is neither sufficiently humane nor sufficiently realistic, especially in light of the rapidly changing

dynamics affecting our people and our communities. It is a source of national embarrassment that state and federal officials cannot reach a comprehensive, cohesive, humane and realistic approach to the current crisis.

We are living in the United States in the midst of an expansive secularization which, among its other devastating effects, seeks to relegate to the sidelines of national discourse any contribution that is offered by a religiously committed people. Leave your religion at the doorstep of your home, we are told; and I fear we too often do exactly this. But to accede to this demand is neither true to our identity as Catholics, nor to the tradition of American political and social discourse. No Catholic seeks to impose Catholic worship on anyone. But because The Lord said that WE (believers) must love our neighbor as ourselves, and that this commandment cannot be separated from the love and loyalty we owe to God, we can never act as if our faith has nothing to do with the general welfare of our brothers and sisters and the wider community. When we speak about immigration, the death penalty, adequate health care for the vulnerable and the elderly, and the dignity of the child in the womb, we are speaking from our consciences as human beings and as believers. It is a human concern that is made all the more powerful and impressive upon our conscience by virtue of our faith in the God made flesh.

In taking active part in the public discourse, we are appealing to the whole nation to take to heart the plight of those who are without power and influence. Because we speak of concerns that touch on human dignity, though, our conviction can resonate in the conscience of the human person, whether a religious believer or not. This is finely taught in the Second Vatican Council's document *Gaudium et Spes*:

Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church does not only communicate divine life to men but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance. Thus through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human.<sup>8</sup>

But it would be a grave ecclesiological error, and a Christological error as well, to say that such political and civil activism is the only or even the most important thing the Church should be doing at this time.

## **II. The Gospel Preached and Celebrated**

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<sup>8</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 41.

It falls to the various levels of government to marshal their resources to protect the life and property of its people. Communities of peoples are the bearers and promoters of culture, for good or for ill, and it falls to the Church to provide the resources of grace to our people that make it possible for them to promote a culture of justice, generosity and perseverance. The Church has ever understood herself as a leaven in the wider community of peoples; bearers of conscience, and of hope. This is the deeper call that the Second Vatican Council called us to hear.<sup>9</sup>

Despair is the last mask hiding the enemy we are dealing with; it saps the human and spiritual resources of a people. This is what is rapidly happening in northern Mexico, and what is also happening in South Texas. Our primary task, then, must be to open wide the streams of grace that nourish us all, so that we can be equipped with the strength and courage that only the Lord can give. Only in this way can we be the sign of hope in the future that is desperately needed in this time of trial. We profess that the Gospel is the light for the nations, and the hope of every human heart. But, do we act on this conviction that the Gospel, once accepted into our lives and the lives of our children, has itself the power to push back the darkness that threatens our communities? Do we truly act out of our conviction that the grace of faith in the Gospel, and the grace of the sacraments, when received with preparation and disposition, has a healing and elevating effect?

The most enduring and effective remedy we offer in this troubled time is to do what we have always done, only with a greater sense of generosity and urgency. We need to teach the Gospel, prepare our people for the sacraments, provide for a real experience of communion with Christ in the Church, and give to all the generations that follow us a sense of the noble call to be courageous and kind, good and generous and forgiving.

In the complexity of the current immigration dynamic I described at the outset of this lecture, I referenced the various ways recent immigrants have been pressured by reality to move to safer places. I worry that these new arrivals are not easily being welcomed into our parish churches. Perhaps fear, even on the American side, keeps the newly arrived from venturing out very often or very far. Perhaps memories of the home they left leaves them listless and unwilling to make the effort to get to know a new community. Whatever the reason, we have a heavy obligation to make the new arrivals welcome in our Churches and at our parish activities.

Historically rooted differences between how we as a Church organize and structure things can put many new arrivals off, be they rich or poor, and these differences can make them feel unwelcomed. The attitude that says, “they can come if they want” is hardly helpful in this situation. All the family situations I described at the

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<sup>9</sup> Gaudium et Spes speaks particularly of this. See especially no. 10, no. 40, and no. 45.

outset cause wounds in the newly arrived, and we fail in our Christian charity if we do not seek out the wounded, and offer them the grace of our communal life as members of Christ's body in the United States. As with all that the Church does, we must get to know the persons whom the Lord puts in our midst, and serve them generously, and invite them to take part. First of all, we do this, by helping them connect to the source of grace that is the Lord, and the communion of the Church. Without this connection to the lived communion of the Church, at Mass, in Religious Education for the children, and in parish life, the immigrant family or individual, again, rich or poor, remains vulnerable to the very despair that the violence they fled caused them to experience in the first place.

And it is with this in mind that I turn to my final reflection.

### **III. The Future on the Border**

A pastor called me one day last spring just to inform me that he had received a call from the local police. They wanted to know if he had a student about 13 or 14 years old by the name of Carlos (not his real name) in his religious education classes. They did not have a last name. The pastor told them there were at least three by that name enrolled. The police then went on to say that they had a tip that a boy by the name of Carlos was being targeted by a local gang precisely because he had decided not to join that gang. The gang members knew he went to Church there and was going to CCD classes. The word on the street was, the police added, that this boy would be beat up or possibly killed. So they were warning the pastor to keep his adults particularly vigilant to look after the kids before and after CCD, and that they, the police would be patrolling the area on Wednesday night for some time to come.

Everywhere I go in the Valley, I repeat a message to whoever will hear me that the ones most at risk are our kids. I plead with parents: spend time with your children. The cartels, and the gangs associated to them start by offering an 11- or 12-year-old 50 bucks to take the drugs across to the other side, or to bring something back. If they do well, they will get more money the next time. They can rise in the ranks and make more money. We have all known this for some time, and law enforcement has been raising this concern, especially recently.<sup>10</sup> The offer is what we call the "glamour of evil."

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<sup>10</sup> Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steve C. McCraw, ass reporters by Reuters, October 17, 2011: Cartels would pay kids \$50 just for them to move a vehicle from one position to another position, which allows the cartel to keep it under surveillance to see if law enforcement has it under surveillance," he said."Of course, once you're hooked up with them, there's consequences."McCraw said 25 minors have been arrested in one Texas border county alone in the past year for running drugs, acting as lookouts, or doing other work for organized Mexican drug gangs. The cartels are now fanning out, he said, and have operations in all major Texas cities.This month, "we made an arrest of a 12-year-old boy who was in a stolen pickup truck with 800 pounds of marijuana," he said. "So they do recruit our kids."

Eleven or 12-year-olds are making decisions about whether to make money quick and easy, or risk being beat up if they choose to live an honest kid's life and go to Church, go to religious education classes. The border violence is not simply about security around the line of demarcation between two sovereign nations; battles are being fought on the borders of the soul that mark the difference between life and death, grace and sin. The conscience of an 11-year-old is the principal battle ground in the current border wars.

I have read a great deal of the French novelist Georges Bernanos, some would say I have read too much. But with a kind of starkness that defies my ability to describe, he relentlessly shows how the soul must sooner or later choose Christ or despair, grace or self-destruction, life or death. My experience in the Valley, I think, has helped me understand what Bernanos saw in the experience of grace and sin. In the end, either our lives are held in the hand of a loving God, or there is nothing holding us at all. *Al fin y al cabo*, either the story of life is a story meant to end in the triumph of life and goodness, or it is a story that must tragically end in the destruction of all things. Between Christ and despair there is no middle ground; there is no safe secular space where we all happily mind our own business. I bring this up because we in the Church must re-engage the urgent necessity of our evangelization efforts, our catechetical and formational efforts on behalf of our families, our young people, our young adults, indeed on behalf of the whole world.

If a 12-year-old does not believe that in the end, love and life wins, than the options open to him or her are fairly obvious. If in the end, death triumphs, then nothing really matters. *Si al fin y al cabo triunfa la muerte, nada importa, y me voy con los que me ofrecen el dinero, las drogas y las pistolas*. There are too many statues of *la santa muerte* in our neighborhoods for me naively to think that this evil we face is simply a political and economic and social problem. The ancient enemy of the human race is drawn by the smell of death, and he disseminates it. He is not a bystander in the tragedy unfolding along the river and beyond. He is the ultimate purveyor of this cynical "nothing really matters anyway" attitude that can infect a young soul or an old one at any time.

The infection is deadly, unless there is some deeper reservoir of life and hope, some stronger conviction about what human life is destined for. We have faith; we must teach the faith. But what do we believe? We believe, as Saint John tells us in his first letter, "Not that we have loved God, but that he has first loved us, and sent his Son as the expiation for our sins."<sup>11</sup> To teach the Gospel, and invite participation in the mysteries of grace is precisely this, to fortify the soul with its deepest need, namely faith in the triumph of love over hatred, grace over sin, goodness over evil. Christ is

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<sup>11</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> john, 4:10.

risen, death does not win. Even a 6-year-old in our religious education classes knows this. We hope and pray this young person still knows this when he or she is 12.

It takes both conscience and courage to be good in this world. Conscience is rooted in the natural law, but the inclination toward the good is both wounded and rudderless without early, age appropriate guidance and formation in grace. And courage is lacking if there is no conviction that the victory is possible. The Gospel taught to a 6-year-old, first communion gently and effectively prepared for, is the beginning of conscience and courage. Because if you believe that God loves you enough to die for you, and give himself to you in the Eucharist, then you believe that in the end, the love of God triumphs over death and sin. In the end, the truth someone teaches a child at age six may be the only thing that really saves the next generation from the designs of death.

We have to refocus more pastoral resources on the younger youth demographic. If our youth groups and youth activities are exclusively aimed at high school or college, I greatly fear we are missing those most at risk. Consult the sacramental statistics of any diocese in the United States, and you will find some manner of drop-off between the numbers of first confession / first communions and the numbers of confirmations. It is a complex question to answer: where did those kids go? But the bottom line is that they are not so much with the Church anymore. And that is the demographic that is being offered the 50 bucks to carry the narcotics, or smuggle the guns. It is not an impossible task to step up our pastoral efforts to connect our middle school-age children to the life of the Church, but it is an urgent task, and an effort that we need to intensify, given what is at stake.

And yes, I think poverty has a lot to do with the vulnerability of this age group, but so does the reality of either a broken home, or two parents who work and are hardly ever home. And a national immigration policy that separates parents who were not born here from children who were born here exacerbates the problem intolerably. If parents are the first teachers of their children about how to tell the difference between right and wrong, both the Church and the wider society need to be marshalling their attention toward the support of parents in this vital, irreplaceable work. The Church, that is to say, we, all of us, need to be actively encouraging parents to spend time with their children, especially when they are very young. Maybe a second job makes for a better life economically, but if there is no time to talk to the kids, reflect with them about what they are seeing at school and in the neighborhood, then the cost of that second job is too high. Parents have to make those kinds of decisions every day.

The school cannot do this, and the parish cannot do it initially. Our public schools are increasingly unable to teach about virtue and the good, largely because the working secular consensus cedes practically all of morality to the private sphere. This disposition toward leaving large swaths of the moral horizon to private decisions, coupled with children who increasingly do not have a stable home-life to return to, has led to a moral

vacuum in the social fabric. How can a 14-year-old hold a gun in the direction of a man in a car, a man who happens to be the bishop of a diocese in northern Mexico? And it is not sufficient to say “well, that happens in Mexico.” Do we think that that 14-year-old does not have a twin somewhere in Pharr, Texas, or in Detroit, Michigan, for that matter? How can this happen? We might as easily ask when hope in the goodness of life was driven from him, and then when the conscience lost its voice.

To give the kind of pastoral attention I am talking about, we have to find ways to coordinate in common the pastoral efforts in parishes on behalf of families, and on behalf of youth. Sometimes these end up being separate efforts. Particularly when dealing with the younger demographic, we must be sensitive to the fact that parents are looking for safe and protected situations for their middle school-age children to develop a strong social and moral sense, as well as a sense of belonging. *Todo el mundo quiere pertenecer, tomar parte.* And if our younger children do not find the right place to belong in the wider community of the parish, they will easily find themselves invited to belong to a gang or a cartel. We should be experts in this basic human desire for community, about having a place, and having something to contribute.

Also, I think we have to do much better at teaching this younger demographic about the beauty and nobility of a call to goodness and holiness. The lives of Saints can be powerful in this aspect of youth formation. If someone had not told me about the life of Maximilian Kolbe when I was starting High School, and handed me a book about him, I doubt I would be here today. Sometimes I think we adults do not truly appreciate how an example of generosity and charity impacts the conscience of a young person. Maybe we get cynical about such things. But the heart of a child is a sacred place, and the early impressions of the sacredness of life and the goodness of God can have a life-long impact. I admire the young man, Carlos, and others like him, who have the courage to go to Mass and religious education classes; he took a risk in saying no to the gang. Where does such courage come from in a young person? It is from the Lord. Something powerful got through to him; and he and we are the better for it.

Do we actually know how important it is what we do every day in the Church? Or do we ourselves give in to a quiet despair that really doubts that in the end it matters very much? Family time, and soccer games; Sunday Mass and parish festivals, confirmation classes, and service projects; baseball games and holy hours for peace; First communions and confession lines; youth rallies, family rosaries, and musical concerts; a time to be together, and a time to be silent, a time to wash cars, and a time to clean up the parish grounds; retreats, and charismatic prayer meetings. The list could go on. What are these things? They are what we do to build up a sense of what it means to live this life in the confidence that faith gives us in the goodness and beauty of life. These are the things we do to build up that sense of prayer, community, and service that make up the essence of what it means to be believers, and to offer light to the next generation. These are some of the things the Lord does to help us in our times of severe

trial. The conscience and courage we seek to inculcate in our communities is the leaven that the Lord gives to his people, through his people. He gives his grace through us, walking together the pilgrimage of life. To the Lord of life, who gives us these gifts, to Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Thank you for your kind attention.